

## **A University's Partnership Reshapes Bowling Green, Ky.**

By KEITH SCHNEIDER



Gary Ransdell, Western Kentucky's president, with the \$10 million alumni center in the background. Credit Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. — When Gary A. Ransdell, the president of Western Kentucky University, invites alumni to view this city's redeveloping downtown from his university's hilltop campus, the response is almost always exclamations of surprise.

Just below Cherry Hall, one of the 108-year-old university's grandest buildings, sits nearly 200,000 square feet of new student housing, built at a cost of \$24 million. There is also a 30,000-square-foot, \$10 million alumni center, and a 72,500-square-foot, \$14.5 million Hyatt Place hotel scheduled to open in 2015.

Next door to the Hyatt site, a \$28 million mixed-use development is under construction. One building will house 240 more students on one side of College Street, and another will have small businesses, restaurants and a rooftop pool.

There are also four new fraternity houses built at a cost of \$3 million, and a 450-space parking deck flanked by 30,000 square feet of retail businesses and restaurants that are expected to open next year.



The Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center, known locally as SKyPAC, is part of an office and entertainment district in central Bowling Green. Credit Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Mr. Ransdell, Western Kentucky's president since 1997, described the projects as the latest additions to \$262 million in downtown construction since 2008 that is rehabilitating Bowling Green's central business district. All of the new structures replace deteriorated homes and ragged retail businesses that for decades formed a barrier between the university and city center.

Much of the student housing has been on the south side of campus, away from downtown. With the new construction, "there's been a shift in student density at the north end of our campus," Mr. Ransdell said. "With each new project that density increases."

"We're all a bunch of bulldogs in this community," he added. "We haven't seen a deal that we didn't like. We want to close them all."

Judging from the scope of the projects and the progress made over the last six years, it appears that deal-making has become a choice skill in this city of 61,000 residents, Kentucky's third largest, after Louisville and Lexington. Arguably the most important pact was the one that the city and Warren County reached with the state to establish a 383-acre, 52-block special development and tax district in 2007.

The district pays local governments 80 percent of the increases in payroll, property, sales and other tax revenue generated by new development within the district. Revenue is devoted to retiring construction bonds, building infrastructure and assisting developers, including the university.

This year the development district, formally called the WKU Gateway to Downtown Bowling Green, will return to the city and county over \$2 million in revenue. Over its 30-year life, ending in 2037, the tax district is expected to deliver \$200 million to the two governments, said Doug Gorman, a downtown business owner and chairman of the Warren County Downtown Economic Development Authority, which oversees the Gateway project.

"The whole point of what we're trying to do is to get more people to enjoy our downtown, to live here and work here," he said. "If you look around now, it's pretty clear that people get the point."

Until the Gateway project began to unfold, Bowling Green was largely known for its university, the third largest in Kentucky, after the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville. Its other claim to fame is the General Motors assembly plant not far away, where Corvettes have been built since 1981. This year a sinkhole opened in a wing of the privately managed National Corvette Museum near the plant, swallowing eight sports cars that were on display and prompting significant increases in attendance.

Some of the museum's visitors wander into Bowling Green's evolving downtown. During a tour, Mr. Gorman identifies the steadily expanding galaxy of arts, entertainment, office and housing projects, big and small, that have quickly risen from blocks that just a few years ago were underused or blighted.



A Hyatt Place hotel is to open next year near Western Kentucky University. Credit Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Development is focused in three distinct hubs. The university, and its 21,000-student market, is heavily influencing construction at the bottom of the Cherry Hill hill, in the southern section of downtown.

One effect of the Gateway development is to increase land values there, said Michael L. Simpson, the owner and president of Chandler Property Management, a real estate development firm based here. "Things are certainly more costly than they were seven or eight years ago," Mr. Simpson said. "Before the Gateway project, a typical lot sold for \$60,000. Today they bring \$90,000 to \$100,000."

Near the center of the Gateway project are four square blocks along East Seventh Avenue and State and College Streets that form a new entertainment and office district. In 2009, the city completed the 4,559-seat Bowling Green Ballpark, home of the Hot Rods, a Class A minor-league baseball affiliate of the Tampa Bay Rays. The stadium was constructed at a total cost of \$30 million, according to city records, and is joined to Hitcents Park Plaza, a \$25 million, 106,000-square-foot mixed-use office building with restaurants and shops along a street-level piazza.

The Hitcents building, which opened last year, is named for a growing local digital mobile games and applications company. Its headquarters are on the top floor, where 60

of the 15-year-old company's 80 employees work. The building wraps around the north and west sides of an 800-space parking deck. Mr. Gorman and city leaders await the start of a 48-unit housing development that is planned for the deck's east side.

Across Seventh Avenue and along College Street, the county completed the \$28.5 million, 1,800-seat Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center, known here as SKyPAC. A \$2 million park between College and State Streets serves as the center's grand entrance. And on the corner of Seventh and College, the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce is housed in a \$4 million, 17,000-square-foot office building it completed in 2007.

The north end of the development district is dominated by the Medical Center, a regional hospital and health care provider. Western Kentucky University constructed a 73,000-square-foot, \$20 million Health Sciences Complex to house its nursing and physical therapy school. The city's special development district has also assisted in the planning and construction of a \$10 million medical office building, a \$3.1 million clinic, the \$2.5 million Hospitality House for ill children and their families, and \$22 million in Medical Center expansion and modernization projects.

The city built a \$2.5 million fire station and encouraged the \$3.5 million restoration and renovation of an old school for housing. In all, 28 projects have been completed or are under construction in the Gateway district.

The big investment in the Gateway project, which continued through the recession, and its results have impressed residents and the elected leaders who negotiated the contracts and shaped the development strategy.

"You know, Western graduates 4,000 students every year," said Mike Buchanon, a Republican who has served as the Warren County judge-executive, the equivalent of a county commission chairman, since 1994. "We're trying to retain our young people. You can't grow a community with only retirees. That eventually catches up with you."

He added: "For those of us who've been in the trenches, this project seems like it's taken a lifetime. None of it has been easy. But now we are all so proud of the excitement, activity, investments, commerce and new life it is bringing to downtown Bowling Green."